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ABSTRACT

Development of the Welcome Center for immigrants and refugees in the School District of Philadelphia is chronicled. The program emerged from dialogue between the Task Force for the Education of Asian Immigrants and Refugee Students and the Philadelphia School District, and began operation under the aegis of the Department of Foreign Language Education. The goal of the pilot project was to assess limited-English-proficient (LEP) students in two subdistricts for health and educational needs, and to explore whether the task force's expectations would be filled if the program were expanded to the entire district. Initially, students were referred by schools, and the center offered testing in English proficiency and basic arithmetic, recorded medical histories, evaluated vision and hearing, evaluated immunization records, provided parent orientation, and identified students' needs for support services such as sheltered classes, first language instruction, pre-referral for special education, and tutoring. Services added during the second year included additional reading and literacy tests, introduction of new levels of English instruction in the schools, and a slide-tape presentation for parents. Efforts were made to improve coordination with teachers and staff, communication with parents, and location for service delivery. The program has been found to be effective in the screening of new LEP students. (MSE)

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Assessing Limited English Proficient Students

A Study of the Development of the Welcome Center

Written by

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The Welcome Center

Increasingly and for various reasons, there has been an influx of people of many nationalities hoping to better their lives by calling the U.S.A. home. The intent of this paper is to show how the School District of Philadelphia has attempted to solve the problem of addressing the educational needs of the young people from around the world who have made their way to our city. The Welcome Center offers broadbased literacy, writing and computation assessments, health screening and placement in the appropriate school and class. In the past some of these services were provided in the school. The purpose of the Welcome Center was to centralize these tasks thereby freeing teachers to carry out their primary function. This report traces the establishment and growth of the Welcome Center, from its infancy through its growing pains to where it is at present.

Pilot Program 1987-1988

The Welcome Center, an outgrowth of a continuing dialogue between the Task Force for the Education of Asian Immigrants and Refugee Students and the School District of Philadelphia began operation as a pilot program in the fall of 1987. The goal of this Pilot Project was to assess Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in two subdistricts of the city for health and educational needs and to explore whether the expectations of the Task Force could be fulfilled if the program were expanded to service the entire school district.

The Welcome Center began operation under the aegis of the Department of Foreign Language Education and was located in a third floor walk-up of building owned by the School District south of the city's center. While it was accessible by public transportation and a map was made available to all applicants, it was difficult for newly arrived non-English speaking people to find, especially those living out of the neighborhood. Nevertheless, it remained there for one and a half years until the present school term.

The staff consisted of a multilingual receptionist, a part-time nurse, and bilingual supervisors, curriculum specialists and coordinators who were responsible for assessing the students. Translators were available on an on-call basis. The entire staff worked under the direction of the Assistant Director of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Bilingual Education whose task was to find slots in neighboring schools that offered ESOL for the incoming students. This was sometimes impeded by the lack of space in the school or regulations concerning desegregation.

Students were usually sent to the Welcome Center by office personnel at their neighborhood school. The receptionist at the Welcome Center would make the appointment, arrange for a translator if needed and fill in school district documents. Supervisory personnel at the center evaluated each student's educational attainments.

Knowledge of English was measured using the Language Assessment Battery test series (LAB). Samples of free written expression in both the native language and English were obtained in response to visual prompts which are line-drawing illustrations of a home or a family. Basic arithmetic operations were assessed using tests for LEP students developed by the Fairfax, Virginia schools. Six editions employing symbols for arithmetic operation used outside the United States were available.

The nurse took the student's medical history, evaluated vision and hearing, and saw that inoculation records were in order. Students who did not have adequate records were asked to visit their physician or local Philadelphia District Health Center.

Orientation for the parents was provided by the receptionist and the professional staff of the Center. This included informing them about the students instructional needs, school lunches, transportation, the parents' rights to waive ESOL instruction, and any student characteristics that required follow-up.

As part of the screening process, Center staff also identified the student's need for supportive services such as sheltered classes, first language instruction, pre-referral for special education, and additional help or tutoring in writing, reading and study skills.

Once screening was completed, a receiving school was identified. The results of the screening were summarized and taken to the receiving school by the students or the parents.

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The evaluation of the pilot year, 1987-88, concluded that the Welcome Center offered five advantages over school screening:

- A more comprehensive testing program was implemented that included several new elements.
- More personalized parent contact and orientation was provided.
- The ability to screen an increasingly heterogeneous LEP population in a variety of languages was broadened.
- The reliability of the testing was enhanced by the use of a cadre of experienced testers and uniform testing conditions.
- The periodic disruption of instruction caused by the in-school screening of newly admitted ESOL students was eliminated.

It was also found that communications between the Welcome Center and the receiving schools were inadequate. Frequently teachers were not

aware that their students had been screened at the center nor what services had been provided.

In addition doubts were voiced regarding the accessibility of the Welcome Center and its capacity to screen the large numbers of newly admitted students in the fall from the entire city.

First Year of Operation: 1988-1989

The Remedial Plan for Services to Asian LEP Students adopted in December, 1988, mandated that the educational status of every LEP student would be assessed for appropriate placement in ESOL classes. This was accomplished by improving the screening of newly admitted LEP students throughout the entire school district and by centralizing the screening of the Welcome Center in August, 1988.

The following assessment procedures used during the pilot year were continued:

- Language Assessment Battery (LAB).
  The LAB was used to establish students' primary ESOL level -- beginning, intermediate or advanced -- and to identify pupils who did not need ESOL. The components of the battery which had been shown to be most effective were used: the Level 1 Listening and Speaking test for beginning first-grade pupils; the complete Level 1 Battery for pupils at the end of first grade or in second grade; and the Speaking and Writing tests of Levels 2, 3, and 4 for older students.

- Fairfax Virginia Public Schools Mathematics Tests.
  These tests were available in six versions employing the mathematical systems used in various parts of the world. Two levels of the tests were used to measure general computation skills: one level for students in grades 1-5 and another for students in grades 6-12. Each level consisted of 20 items which had been coordinated with the skills of the Philadelphia Standardized Mathematics Curriculum for each grade, so that the tests provided curriculum-referenced diagnostic information. The number of correct items and performance on each item were reported.

- Writing Samples In First Language and English.
  Writing ability was evaluated by having the student choose a picture related to family or school activities and writing about the picture. Writing ability was rated as coherent discourse (several sentences that make sense and form an integrated whole), disconnected discourse (a few disconnected sentences or phrases), single words and letters (knows writing system but cannot write neaningful text), or no skills (cannot write single letters or words or does not know how to use writing equipment).

- Health Screening
  The staff nurse checked the student's height, weight, immunization history, vision and hearing. A general medical history was taken and the results were used to identify students requiring medical follow-up or special attention at the receiving school.

During the 1988-89 school year four new features were provided to enhance services to LEP students and their families:

- Botel Reading Milestones Tests.
  These tests were used to obtain grade equivalent scores for English reading and to establish eligibility for federally funded, programs. Two test levels, for grades 1-3 and for grades 4-12, measured decoding and comprehension skills.

- San Francisco Unified School District Primary Language Literacy Tests.
  These tests were employed to obtain gross indications of students' ability to read their first language. The tests included basic vocabulary, sentence completion and comprehension items. They were available in Cambodian, Vietnamese, Spanish and Chinese editions. As the test developers had not provided information regarding the interpretation of the scores, only the number of items attempted and answered correctly were reported. The results were used to indicate whether the student was literate in the first language.

- Introduction of New ESOL Levels.
  During the 1988-89 school year, an ESOL level for pre-literate students was introduced at three schools. At these sites, the Botel and San Francisco tests were used along with the LAB results to provide four ESOL instructional levels instead of the three used elsewhere: Level 1 (pre-low literate), Level 2 (literate beginning), Level 3 (intermediate), Level 4 (advanced). The four-level organization of ESOL instruction is expected to be used universally in 1989-90 as it is a feature of the newly revised Standardized ESOL Curriculum.

- Slide-Tape Presentation.
  To introduce parents to the resources and operation of Philadelphia public schools, a slide-tape presentation was shown on a regular basis. It was used daily from the middle of October through February and then on an as-needed basis. It conveyed information about educational programs, roles of staff members, and where and how parents can get help. The sound track was available in nine languages: Vietnamese, Spanish, Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese, Cambodian, Laotian, Korean, Russian, and English.

During the first complete school year of Welcome Center operations 2672 Asian and non-Asian students from 43 countries received services. Of this number 963 were tested during September and October. Somewhat

over 300 of the expected students had not been to the Center by the end of the school year although they were receiving services in their school. It was speculated that the reasons for this were:

- The cost and inconvenience of a trip to the Welcome Center from some parts of the city.

- The time lapse between the day an appointment was made and the date the student was to come to the Center.

- The parents' failure to place a high value on visiting the Center once they realized that their children were being served in ESOL classes without having been screened at the Center.

The impact of the new procedures, Botel Reading Milestones Test and the San Francisco Unified School District Primary Language Literacy Tests, was felt in increased testing time and caused a backlog in the appointment schedule that then created crowded conditions in the facility. It was estimated by the staff that 60% to 70% of the students could read well enough to take these tests.

During routine visits to schools, it was learned that those ESOL teachers who had received all of the screening information from the Center found it to be helpful. The teachers of literate bilingual students found the Botel reading levels especially useful for determining the reading materials that should be assigned.

Half of the 24 ESOL teachers interviewed reported that they were not aware of all the information coming from the Center because it had not been shared with them. Every teacher interviewed knew about the LAB scores, but many were unaware of the other procedures. These findings parallel the conclusions of the previous year's Welcome Center evaluation.

Most ESOL teachers did not realize that they should have been sharing reading, writing and arithmetic test scores with their students' subject teachers. As a result test information, other than the ESOL levels, was often not used.

While waiting for evaluations from the Welcome Center, some teachers screened their students to establish provisional ESOL levels. They said that these levels generally were confirmed by the evaluation results from the Center.

It was also found that some teachers had already given the LAB which had been their practice in previous years. It was stressed that this assessment was only to be used at the Welcome Center.

Observations at the Center, comments of the Center staff, and information gathered during visits to schools suggested four important ways the Center could be improved:

- Location and Number of Centers: Additional Welcome Centers should be located in areas of the city where LEP students

reside. They should be able to accommodate the large number of students who must be screened at the beginning of the school year.

- Missed Appointments: Steps should be taken to increase the probability that appointments to the Center will be kept. Communication with parents should emphasize the importance of the ESOL and the health screening.

- Receiving School Staff: Staff development programs should be used to assure that faculty of both ESOL and non-ESOL schools have opportunities to learn about the Center, to become familiar with the ESOL screening processes and records, and to make efficient and effective use of screening information.

- Client Satisfaction: In the coming year a sample of parents and students should be interviewed by bilingual personnel in order to obtain firsthand reactions to Welcome Center services.

Present Year of Operation: 1989-1990

The 1989-90 school year saw the continuation of the Welcome Center in two different locations. Both are located in schools, one in the southern section of the city and the other in the northern section.

Observations at both of these sites found spacious newly renovated suites with large reception areas and individual testing rooms. The Welcome Center North has an area set aside for young children with a child size table and chairs, puzzles, crayons and coloring books that are frequently in use. There is also a magazine rack with timely reading material in English and Spanish. There are five teachers on special assignment that rotate between centers and test incoming students. The two former assistant directors of the Foreign Language Education Department are each in charge of one of the centers. There is a receptionist, two office assistants and a nurse at each center. Hours correspond with the school. Due to patterns of immigration along with neighborhood make-up the Welcome Center located in the northern section of the city is busier than the southern.

In speaking with personnel at the Centers, it was noted that there may be some schools where students are given the LAB by teachers. This has not been verified at present but with a school district as large as Philadelphia, it seems quite possible that this may be so. It may be that the ongoing communication dilemma will be the major problem held over from the previous year. What with the ever increasing numbers of oppressed people reaching our shores, the lack of qualified ESOL teachers poses a problem that should be addressed before it becomes more serious.

The Welcome Center has proven to be an effective approach to the screening of newly-arrived LEP students. The number of students it served, the care with which the staff served them, and the value of the services it provided are its major achievement. The growth of the Welcome Center and the quality of services provided since its inception

has been a source of satisfaction. It is hoped the concept of uniform centralized testing centers has enough flexibility to meet the challenge of the future. For cities that have encountered a large growth in the population of foreign born students the experiences of the School District of Philadelphia during the last two years should be of value in minimizing the stresses of uncharted waters.